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ABSTRACT

Intended for students in grades 10-11, this lesson plan outlines a world history lesson that focuses on Baghdad in the Classical Era (AD 762-1258). The lesson plan states a purpose; cites educational objectives; delineates step-by-step procedures for classroom implementation; suggests various exercises (such as brainstorming, map activity, guided practice, and independent practice); and contains an eight item bibliography. Contains work sheets for the activities and five readings from selected articles. (BT)

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World History Lesson
Grades 10-11

Walbrook High School
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Lesson Plan: Baghdad in the Classical Era (A.D. 762-1258)

Purpose: The students will discover how and why Baghdad was the center of the known world of Europe, Asia, and Africa world during the Middle Ages.

Objectives: The students should be able to

1) Locate Iraq in relative terms (Geography Theme of Location), identify some of the physical features and human characteristics of Iraq (Geography Theme of Place), and identify some examples of human interaction in Iraq and the surrounding region (Geography Theme of Movement).

2) Construct one or more hypotheses explaining how the rulers and inhabitants of medieval Iraq (1) exploited their location and (2) modified or adapted to their environment to build Baghdad into the most prosperous and influential city in the known world (Geography Themes of Movement and Relationships).

   (For information on the Fundamental Themes in Geography (Location, Place, Relationships, Movement, and Regions), see Guidelines for Geographic Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools by the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers, 1984.)

Procedures:

1) Brainstorming exercise (as a class): Assess prior knowledge of Iraq and Baghdad.

2) Map exercise (in small groups):
   A. Determine relative location of Iraq.
   B. Determine physical features and human characteristics of Iraq.
   C. Determine human interaction in and around Iraq.

3) Guided practice (in small groups): Construction of hypotheses explaining the presence of Arabic writing on a Saxon coin.

4) Independent practice (in small groups):
   A. Reading of brief historical passage related to medieval Iraq and Baghdad.
   B. Construction of hypotheses explaining how Baghdad developed into the most prosperous and influential city in the known world.

5) Closing (as a class): Discussion of how and why Baghdad was the center of the known world during the Middle Ages.

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Body of Presentation:

1) Opening: Brainstorming Exercise:
   A. Ask the class an open-ended question like "What comes to mind when you think of the country of Iraq and the city of Baghdad?"
   B. Each student records his or her responses on the brainstorm web (work sheet #1) provided.

2) Development:

   A. Map Activity:
      1. Working in small groups, the students will examine maps of the modern Middle East. They will seek the following information: (1) location of Iraq and Baghdad in relative terms, (2) physical features (climate zones, vegetation zones, land forms, and rivers and waterways) in and near Iraq, (3) human characteristics (population centers and economic activities) in and near Iraq, and (4) human interactions (lines of communication and trade patterns) in and near Iraq. (See Hammond Atlas of the Middle East. Newly Revised. Union, NJ: Hammond World Atlas Corporation, 2000.)
      2. The groups will record their data on work sheet #2 and briefly share their findings with the rest of the class.

   B. Guided Practice:
      1. Working in small groups, the students will examine a photocopy of an old Saxon coin, the Offa dinar, that contains Arabic writing on one side. Each group will construct a hypothesis explaining the presence of the Arabic writing.
      2. Each group will record its hypothesis on work sheet #3 and briefly share it with the class. (Possible answer: Since Islamic civilization was the most advanced civilization in the known world during the Middle Ages, Offa, a Saxon king of England, sought a measure of sophistication for his kingdom by stamping Arabic writing on his coins.) (Note: Photographic copies of Offa's dinar are available from the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum (www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk).)

   C. Independent Practice:
      1. Each group will read an excerpt of an historical work on classical Baghdad. Each group will study a different excerpt. The excerpts are as follows.
         a. A History of Islamic Societies by Ira M. Lapidus (1988)
         b. The Middle East: A History by Sidney K. Fisher and William Ochsenwald (1990)

c. The Prophet and the Caliphate: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century by Hugh Kennedy (1986)/The Shaping of Islamic Rule by Jacob Lassner (1980)
d. Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capitulation of Constantinople, vol. II, edited by Bernard Lewis (1974)
e. The Arabs: A Short History by Philip K. Hitti (1949)

2. Working in small groups, the students will draw upon the information they have obtained from the map activity, guided practice, and reading to construct one or more hypotheses which address the following question: "How did the rulers and inhabitants of medieval Iraq (1) exploit their location and (2) modify or adapt to their environment to turn Baghdad into the most prosperous and influential city in the known world?" Each group will record its hypothesis on work sheet #4 and share it with the class.

3) Closing: The teacher leads a class discussion during which the students demonstrate their understanding of how and why Baghdad became the most prosperous and influential city in the known world of Europe, Asia, and Africa during the Middle Ages. The teacher records the reasons on the chalkboard.

Bibliography:

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Baghdad in the Classical Era (A.D. 762-1258)

Work Sheet #1: Brainstorming Web

What comes to your mind when you think of the country of Iraq and the city of Baghdad, **past and present**?

List as many things as you can think of.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

Work Sheet #1: Brainstorming Web

Baghdad in the Classical Era (A.D. 762-1258)

Work Sheet #2: Map Activity

Working with a partner, examine a map of the modern Middle East and perform the following tasks:

1. Describe the locations of Iraq and Baghdad in relative terms (i.e., their relationship to other places):

   Iraq: _____

   _____

   Baghdad: _____

   _____

2. List some of the physical features (e.g., climate, vegetation, land forms, rivers, waterways) of the area in and near Iraq:

   _____

   _____

3. List some human characteristics (e.g., population centers and economic activities) in the area in and near Iraq:

   _____

   _____

4. List some of the human interactions (e.g., lines of communications and trade patterns) in and near Iraq:

   _____

   _____

Work Sheet #2: Map Activity

Baghdad in the Classical Era (A.D. 762-1258)

Work Sheet #3: Guided Practice

"The Coin of Offa:" Hypothesis Development

Working with a partner, examine a photocopy of an old Saxon coin (the coin of Offa). The coin dates back to the Early Middle Ages (A.D. 800-1000). Note the presence of Arabic writing on one side of the coin.

Why would a Saxon ruler from the Early Middle Ages put Arabic writing on one of the coins of his realm?

With a partner, develop an hypothesis that could explain the presence of Arabic writing on the coin of Offa.

Work Sheet #3: Guided Practice

Baghdad in the Classical Era (A.D. 762-1258)

Work Sheet #4: Independent Practice

Hypothesis Development

Read the excerpt of an historical work on Baghdad, then, with a partner, develop one or more hypotheses that address the following question: How did the rulers and inhabitants of medieval Iraq (1) exploit their location and (2) modify or adapt to their environment to turn Baghdad into the most prosperous and influential city in the known world? (In short, what were the conditions or circumstances that contributed to Baghdad becoming the most prosperous and influential city during the middle ages?)

Work Sheet #4: Independent Practice

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Reading #1: From A History of Islamic Societies by Ira M. Lapidus (1988):

Almost the first venture of the new (Abbasid) regime was the creation of a new capital. Ever since ancient times, Middle Eastern regimes had built new cities as headquarters for their armies and administrative staffs, and to symbolize the advent of a new order. The rulers of the Assyrian empire created the famous cities of Ninevah and Nimrod; the Sasanians founded Ctesiphon. In a strategic location on the main routes between Iraq, Iran and Syria, in one of the most fertile parts of Iraq with ready access to the Tigris-Euphrates water system, the Abbasids built Baghdad to be their place and administrative base.

Like its predecessors, Baghdad rapidly transcended the intentions of its founders and grew from a military and administrative center into a major city. . . . The original Baghdad . . . was a three-part complex--troop settlement in al-Harbiya, the working population in al-Karkh, and the administrative city itself, Madinat al-Salam (City of Peace). No sooner was Madinat al-Salam completed than the decisions of the caliphs to build additional residences and administrative complexes in the immediate vicinity stimulated the growth of additional quarters. . . .

Never had there been a Middle Eastern city so large. Baghdad was not a single city, but a metropolitan center made up of a conglomeration of districts on both sides of the Tigris River. In the ninth century it measured about 25 square miles, and had a population of between 300,000 and 500,000. It was ten times the size of Sasanian Ctesiphon. . . . Baghdad was larger than Constantinople, which was estimated to have had a population of 200,000, and larger than any other Middle Eastern city until Istanbul in the sixteenth century. In its time, Baghdad was the largest city in the world outside of China.

Its vast size is an index of its incomparable importance in the formation of the Abbasid empire, society and culture. As a capital city it was the center of economic opportunity. Baghdad grew into a great city of international trade and of immensely productive textile, leather, paper, and other industries. Most important in Middle Eastern history, however, was the cosmopolitan character of its population. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as secret pagans, Persians, Iraqis, Arabs, Syrians, and Central Asians made up its populace. Soldiers and officials, the workers who built the city, the people who lived in the surrounding villages, merchants from Khurasan and the East who engaged in the India traffic through the Persian Gulf, also settled in Baghdad. Basrans seeking intellectual contacts and business fortunes, notables and landowners from Ahwaz, cloth workers from Khuzistan, prisoners of war from Anatolia, scholars from Alexandria, Harran, and Jundishapur, and Nestorian Christians from all over Iraq, made Baghdad their home. Baghdad, then, was the product of the upheavals, population movements, economic changes, and conversions of the preceding centuries; the home of a new Middle Eastern society, heterogeneous and cosmopolitan, embracing numerous Arab and non-Arab elements and the Islamic religion. Baghdad provided the wealth and manpower to govern a vast empire; it crystallized the culture which became Islamic civilization.

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Reading #2: From The Middle East: A History by Sydney N. Fisher and William Ochsenwald (1990):

The destruction of the Umayyad (caliphate in Damascus) marked the opening of a new era in Muslim development. With the establishment of the Abbasid family in the caliphate, the political center of Islam shifted eastward to the Tigris-Euphrates valley. . . . Iraq was more productive than Syria or Egypt and profited from extensive trade with India, China, the Indies, and central Asia, whereas commerce languished in the Mediterranean and Europe. The markets of India and China were fabulous and their industry varied; the decaying economy of the West . . . was yielding rapidly to the demands of self-subsistent agricultural life. . . .

The true installation of the new empire occurred with the ascension to the caliphate in 754 of . . . al-Mansur . . . .

Like many of the Abbasids who followed, al-Mansur pursued and destroyed rivals. . . . On one occasion, when his troops had gone to Medina to disperse disloyal Shiites, al-Mansur discovered that his personal safety was in question, especially since his residence lay so close to hostile Kufah. The danger led him to build in 762-766 a new capital at Baghdad, only 30 kilometers north of Ctesiphon, where a personal bodyguard of several thousand was on hand at all times. This new circular fortress-palace of al-Mansur grew . . . into the fabulous luxury-filled city of Baghdad. . . .

The bases of Abbasid wealth rested on agriculture and a century of relatively capable, honest, and stable administration of the provinces. Caliph al-Mansur established such a vigilant and judicious system of government throughout the empire and enforced such thrift that it took more than a century of profligate largesse to dislocate the economy of the state. In Iraq, the ancient canal system initially was operated so efficiently and extended to such a degree that productivity rose. In that same century imperial revenues from Egypt, Syria, and Iran showered great wealth upon the ruling circles and the inhabitants of the capital cities.

As a natural corollary to this organized agriculture and governmental stability, a flourishing commerce and, for that age, an advanced technical industry arose. The great preponderance of commerce was in the nature of "domestic" trade. Caravans plied the trade routes from the Indus to the Pyrenees, distributing the wares of each province throughout the empire and exchanging manufactures of Iran for those of Egypt, carpets of Tabaristan for paper of Baghdad. . . .

The bulk of "foreign" trade was with the Far East. From Baghdad and Basrah, Muslim merchants carried their goods by sea to China, India, and the Archipelago, but the main route to China lay overland through Samarkand. A flourishing trade across the Sahara subsequently developed. . . . Goods from the Middle East were too expensive and too refined for barbarous Western tastes, and the West had little to offer in exchange.

Concurrent with the rich agriculture and brisk commerce of the Abbasid empire there developed an active industry in every province. Artisan traditions of the ancient Middle East had never perished, and under a relatively secure political system these industries revived and expanded. Textiles of linen, cotton, silk and wool were the most important.

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Reading #3: From The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphate: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century by Hugh Kennedy (1986):

In the early days after the (Abbasid) revolution, the caliphs had been based in Kufa or in temporary settlements nearby, each known as Hashimiyya. In 762, however, al-Mansur began the construction of a purpose-built capital at Baghdad. The location was at the northern end of the Sawad (alluvial plains of southern Iraq) but, unlike Kufa, it also lay on the great road from Iraq to Khurasan (northeast Iran), now such a strategic highway. It also had very good river communications with Basra to the south, and along the Tigris and the Euphrates with Mosul, Raqqa and the rich grain-growing areas of the Jazira (the "island" between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers). Not only did these communications encourage trade, they also allowed Baghdad to import large amounts of food. The city rapidly expanded beyond the size which could be supplied from the immediate hinterland, and the grain of the Jazira and the dates of Basra were vital for its inhabitants, a fact which gave rise to acute crises of supply when civil war or political unrest interfered with communications. The site was ideally chosen and the subsequent prosperity of the city bears witness to the acumen of its founder. . . .

Since the court was established in the city, the economic opportunities were very considerable and the caliph was able to reward his followers handsomely. There was also the need for security, a need which had been graphically demonstrated some four years previously when the caliph had almost been murdered during a riot by some of his troops. To this end he built a round, administrative city, sheltering a palace, a mosque and a garrison of picked troops and defended by a high wall. This was the nucleus of the city but most people lived beyond the walls of the Round City, in the rapidly proliferating suburbs and the new quarters developed across the Tigris on the east bank by the caliph's son al-Madhi. Baghdad became the prototype for numerous Islamic "new towns" (of which Samarra and Cairo are the best known) founded by rulers to house their followers and to generate income . . . .

From The Shaping of Abbasid Rule by Jacob Lassner (1980):

It is universally accepted that the specific location of the Round City (Baghdad) was dictated by both economic and defensive considerations. To the east, the Caliph was protected by the Tigris, a wide, winding river that could not be forded. As a result, throughout the history of Baghdad, movement across the ancient carrier of international trade was generally funneled through a series of pontoon bridges. These structures rose with the flooding, were easily repaired, and . . . could be easily cut from (their) moorings, thus safeguarding the Caliph from a flanking action. Similarly, the intricate system of canals situated directly south of the Round City . . . provided a natural barrier against an attacking army, so that an adversary marching on the city would be forced to canalize his troops in a predictable line of attack. Finally, the western and northern approaches were shielded by . . . a man-made waterway, which bifurcated from the Isa (canal) west of the Round City and emptied into the Tigris to the north of it. . . .

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Reading #4: An Excerpt from Buldan by al-Yaqubi (9th Century), Contained in Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capitulation of Constantinople, Vol. II, Edited by Bernard Lewis (1974):

I begin with Iraq only because it is the center of the world, the navel of the earth, and I mention Baghdad first because it is the center of Iraq, the greatest city, which has no peer in the east or west of the world in extent, size, prosperity, abundance of water, or health of climate, and because it is inhabited by all kinds of people, town-dwellers and country-dwellers. To it they come from all countries, far and near, and people from every side have preferred Baghdad to their own homelands. There is no country, the peoples of which have not their own quarter and their own trading and financial arrangements. In it there is gathered that which does not exist in any other city in the world. On its banks flow two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and thus goods and foodstuffs come to it by land and by water with the greatest of ease, so that every kind of merchandise is completely available, from east and west, from Muslim and non-Muslim lands. Goods are brought from India, Sind, China, Tibet, the lands of the Turks, the Daylam, the Khazars, the Ethiopians, and others to such an extent that the products of the countries are more plentiful in baghdad than in the countries from which they come. They can be procured so readily and so certainly that it is as if all the good things of the world are sent there, all the treasures of the earth assembled there, and all the blessings of creation perfected there. . . . The weather is temperate, the soil is rich, the water is sweet, the trees are thriving, the fruit luscious, the seeds are fertile, good things are abundant, and springs are easily found. Because of the temperate weather and rich soil and sweet water, the character of the inhabitants is good, their faces bright, and their minds untrammeled. The people excel in knowledge, understanding, letters, manners, insight, discernment, skill in commerce and crafts, cleverness in every argument, proficiency in every calling, and mastery of every craft. . . .

Thanks to clear discernment, sound intelligence, and perfect judgement, (the Abbasids) saw the merits of Iraq, its magnificence, spaciousness, and central situation. They saw that it was not like Syria, with its pestilential air, narrow houses, rugged soil, constant diseases, and uncouth people; nor was it like Egypt, with changeable weather and many plagues, situated between a damp and fetid river, full of unhealthy mists that engender disease and spoil food, and the dry, bare mountains, so dry and salty and bad that no plant can grow or any spring appear; nor like Ifriqiya (North Africa), far from the peninsula of Islam (Arabia) and the holy house of God, with uncouth people and many foes; . . . nor like the Hijaz (western Arabia, site of Mecca and Medina) where life is hard and means are few and the people's food comes from elsewhere . . . ; nor like Tibet, where, because of the foul air and food, the people are discolored, with stunted bodies and tufty hair.

When they understood that Iraq was the best of countries, the Abbasids decided to settle there.

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Reading #5: From The Arabs: A Short History by Philip K. Hitti (1949):

. . . It was under the Abbasids that Islamic civilization experienced its golden age.

Baghdad was the creation of the Abbasids, the city which the second ruler of the dynasty (al-Mansur) had caused to be built on the west bank of the Tigris River . . . . "It is an excellent military camp," he had remarked. "Besides, here is the Tigris to put us in touch with the lands as far as China and bring us all that the seas yield as well as well as the food products of Mesopotamia, Armenia and their environs. Then there is the Euphrates to carry from us all that Syria, al-Raqqah and adjacent lands have to offer." It was a sagacious choice, and the new city--on the construction of which one hundred thousand laborers, craftsmen, and architects worked for four years--instantly flourished.

The city was circular in form--whence the name the Round City--with double brick walls, a deep moat and a third innermost wall rising ninety feet and surrounding the central area. The walls had four gates from which four highways, starting from the center of the circle, radiated like the spokes of a wheel to the four corners of the empire. . . .

The new location opened the way for ideas from the East. Arab Islam succumbed to Persian influence . . . . Their influence softened the rough edges of the primitive Arabian life and paved the way for a new era distinguished by the cultivation of science and scholarly pursuits. . . .

Along Baghdad's miles of wharves lay hundreds of vessels, including ships of war and pleasure craft and varying from Chinese junks to native rafts of inflated sheepskins . . . . Into the bazaars of the city came porcelain, silk and musk from China; spices, minerals and dyes from India and the Malay Archipelago; rubies, lapis lazuli, fabrics and slaves from the lands of the Turks in Central Asia; honey, wax, furs and white slaves from Scandinavia and Russia; ivory, gold dust and black slaves from eastern Africa. Chinese wares had a special bazaar devoted to their sale. The provinces of the empire itself sent by caravan or sea their domestic products: rice, grain and lined from Egypt; glass, metal ware and fruits from Syria; brocade, pearls and weapons from Arabia; silks, perfumes and vegetables from Persia.

From Baghdad and other export centers, Arab merchants shipped to the Far East, Europe, Africa fabrics, jewelry, metal mirrors, glass beads and spices. The hoards of Arab coins recently found in places as far north as Russia, Finland, Sweden and Germany testify to the world-wide commercial activity of the Moslems of this and the later period. The adventures of Sindbad the Sailor, which form one of the best-known tales in The Thousand and One Nights, have long been recognized as based upon actual reports of voyages made by Moslem merchants.

Merchants played a leading part in the Baghdad community. Members of each craft and trade had their shops in the same market as in the present day.

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